Interpreting in the Landscape

A Hebridean Perspective

Richard Rabinowitz

Each summer, I escape from the steamy precincts of New York City to walk the Hebridean hills. For an interpretive planner, the Scottish landscape of lochs and heather-covered hillsides is blissfully free of the "visitors" whose interests I cultivate assiduously the other 11 months of the year. But even in this isolated corner of the Isle of Skye, I occasionally start trying to imagine what it might be like to create an interpretive landscape. I ponder, what could be done to enhance the visitors' understanding of such a wonderful place?

I suggest that there are three possible forms of landscape interpretation.

First, there is interpretation constructed into the landscape, but clearly distinguished from it, like "wayside" signage.

Second, there is "extrinsic" interpretation that is about the landscape but not actually set in it, like a guidebook.

And third, there are ways in which the landscape can be "self-interpretive," by incorporating elements that are not designedly informational but nonetheless convey ideas about the place, as the stones in a graveyard do.

Each form has its virtues and its deficiencies. My goal here is to encourage the landscape architects, architects, curators, and preservation planners of cultural landscapes to consider creative alternatives to the ubiquitous (and I would say generally boring) plaques or wayside graphic panels that have defaced American "historic sites" for three generations.

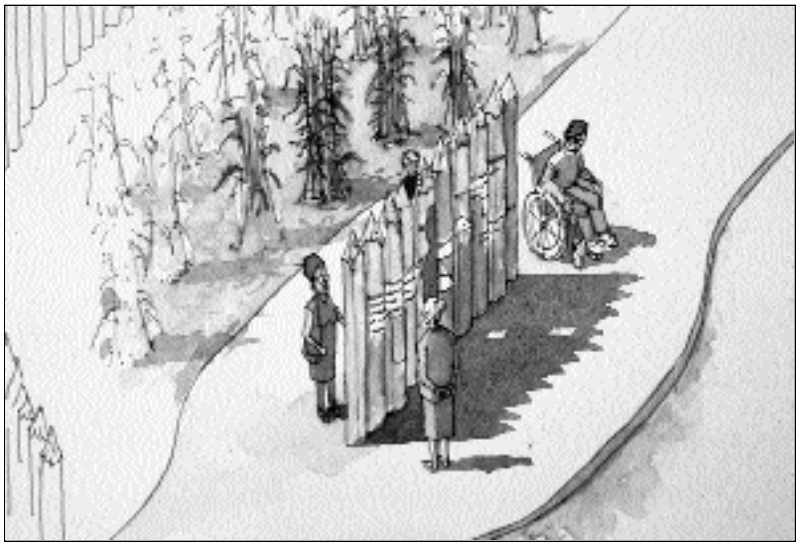
I. Interpretation Placed on the Cultural Landscape

Historic markers, commemorative plaques, and wayside interpretive panels have been an important part of 20th-century historical observance in the United States. They seem to have originated in efforts to make the sites of settlement, early skirmishes with the Indians or the British, or the demolished homes of lesser luminaries. (Greater figures had their houses preserved.) In their remoteness from the actuality of the present scene, they initially had a believe-it-or-not quality about them. "Could you imagine," they all seemed to say, "that this quiet stream was the site of an Indian raid in 1758?"

By the 1940s, motorists could travel on roads in every state in the Union and confront a series of markers, picking up anecdotes about the past but almost no sense of the historical texture of the contemporary environment. Since then, waysides have had to carry a heavier burden—interpreting sites in which the evidences of history or natural history are still present.

In this task, waysides are almost impossible to get right. Markers must be conspicuous enough to attract attention but not so intrusive as to compete with landscape features they are meant to interpret. Because they sit right in the landscape, they don't offer visitors a threshold (like a museum or historic house doorway) to prepare for the attention they demand. If they are primarily verbal, they have to speak to audiences who may not be intellectually prepared for their complexity. The historic districts in New York City, for example, are cluttered with brown signposts using fancy architectural history terms to describe early design elements of each neighborhood. Oblivious to the century or more of urban history that followed, these signs have often been sadly (but perhaps appropriately) reintegrated with street life by serving as convenient panels for the latest generation of graffiti artists.

The most up-to-date signs, frequently constructed of enamelized porcelain or resinous layers of film, often incorporate historical images quite well, even in color, but rarely are the pictures large enough or clear enough to add much context to the viewer's perception of the present-day scene.

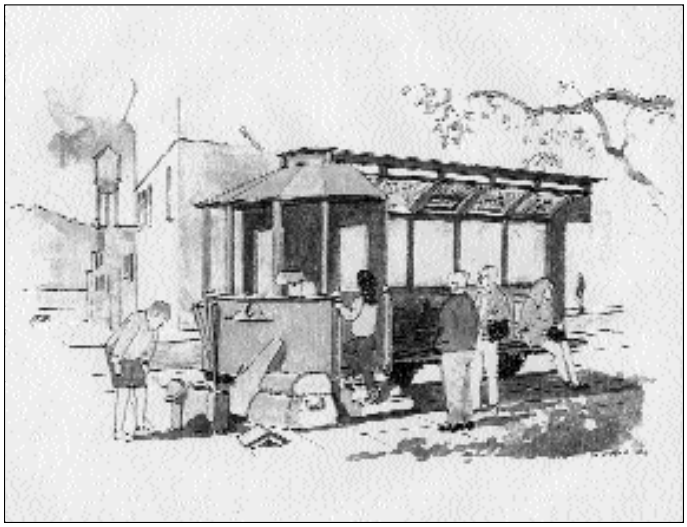


Interpretation constructed in the landscape: "A Fence between Peoples." In the 1660s, colonial Maryland legislated penalties against Indians who failed to fence out the wandering pigs and cattle of English settlers. An interpretive dialogue along the fence re-creates for pairs of visitors the escalating misunderstanding between the races in the colony. Design by American History Workshop for Historic St. Mary's City Commission.

Even when these objections can be met, there is generally a problem in reading substantial text out-of-doors because of lighting conditions. Since an increasing proportion of our visitors are older people, they will generally prefer to read from print pieces like brochures, which can be held at exactly the desired position for bifocals, than from large-scale signs.

A series of signs along a "history trail" may become a rhythmic structure that virtually supplants the experience of the landscape itself; visitors may construe their visits as the passage from number 1 to number 57 rather than a walk along the canal. (This is also a danger with printed guides as well that employ numbering systems.)

Bronze Beaver on Morrison Street, near Pioneer Courthouse Square, Portland, OR, by Georgia Gerber reminds Oregonians of an early export commodity. Photo by author.



"Heinrich's Day," an interpretive trail through Centre Wheeling provides visitors with clues to the recurring appearance of a boy throughout this industrial neighborhood in 1880. Design by American History Workshop for Wheeling National Heritage Area.

Not all outdoor exhibits need to be signs. Models can also be placed in the open air. Among the best are those built to orient sightless visitors by providing tactile representations of a historic or natural area—which turn out, of course, to be equally successful with other visitors. Climb-on or crawl-over landscape models also work brilliantly with those of our little visitors with Matchbox cars poking out of their pockets.

II. Interpretation Carried into the Cultural Landscape

When it won't work to mark the cultural landscape itself, it makes sense to equip visitors to explore it on their own. Portable interpretive media include all manner of guides, books, maps, brochures, as well as live tour guides. Let me try to suggest some implications of their application.

Print formats work by destabilizing, for a moment, the visitors' movement through and placement in the landscape. A **map** asks visitors to transform their eye-level perspective on the environment into a kind of abstracted aerial view. It construes all landscape features—natural and manmade—chiefly on the basis of their linear distance from "where you are," encouraging the illusion that the visitor is the still center of an unfamiliar world. A **guide,** by contrast, converts visual information into a verbal and narrative sequence, that is, into an experience of time rather than space. But not all such extrinsic forms of interpretation are verbal. **Images** of the site, like photographs taken years apart, also stimulate visitors by unsettling and dislodging their ordinary perceptual framing of the scene.

Guidebooks may be read aloud, and generally this assists an understanding of the scene they represent. It is also possible to provide visitors with aural interpretive media. Unlike print guides, sound recordings don't compete with the visuality of the setting. But mechanical contrivances do impose a time-discipline (the "attention span") that may disturb visitors' sense of freedom in the outdoor environment. Musical and sound effects are tempting supplements to verbal information, but they seem to interfere with and even suppress too much of the visitors' personal sensory apparatus; they are valuable only in indoor installations, and then only with great care. In Scotland, I can recall one great exception, and that was a lone (live) piper's playing mournfully amid the gloom of Glencoe, which evoked astonishingly the site of a terrible massacre three centuries before. Even the most well-scripted audio guide, read with the most authoritative TV announcer's sonority, fatigues quickly, compared to distinctive celebrity voices, or texts drawn from literary sources (say of Will Cather's New Mexico, the Brontes' Yorkshire, or Faulkner's Mississippi).

Another variety of extrinsic interpretive formats is the interpretive exhibit, and especially the landscape model, placed in a visitor center and seen prior to an excursion outdoors. Cultural landscapes that have witnessed great historical transformations are better interpreted through careful models of their condition from period to period. At Harvard Forest in Petersham, MA, there is an effective sequence of four models that show a single farm site from the early-18th century to the 1930s. But visitor centers, powerful experiences in themselves, often fail to impress a message in the minds of visitors that is simple and effective enough to carry with them and apply to the phenomena they encounter in the landscape.

III. Interpretation "Built" out of the Cultural Landscape

The inquisitive traveler is often richly rewarded by learning to read historical and cultural traces actually embedded in the landscape. Nothing shows the political reach, as well as his personal braggadocio, as all those 1930s highway bridges in Louisiana with signs warmly celebrating the leadership of Gov. Huey P. Long. Town and road names always reveal important facts of historical geography—where the grist mill was, where the Germans settle, which places were laid out in the years surrounding the War of Independence (hence, "Congress Street"). Monuments to the Civil War dead mark not only a community's 19th-century losses but

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yard and small seedling garden. These environments will contain native and imported plants known to have been present in the region during the St. Mary's City occupancy.

The visitor will circulate through the city on a contemporary path. The original plan of the historic town was organized around a butterfly-shaped circulation system. The new visitor path will intersect the historic system at several points. The visitor path will change from boardwalk to concrete, with the historic butterfly path surfaced in a contrasting gravel. The concrete, colored to resemble dried mud, will be imprinted, at intervals, with hoof prints, paw prints, foot prints, and plant impressions and, as such, serve as an interpretive element.

The interpretive devices will be clear products of our time, blended creatively with objects, words and lifeways from the past. Each device will demonstrate an aspect of the themes of the area calling for an interaction, a perception, a feeling to be evoked. Planning also addresses practical needs including visitor services, disabled access, and maintenance.

As a culture, our tendency is to focus on built elements, therefore, interpretation of the cultural landscape is absolutely necessary for the average visitor at an historic property in order to understand the history of the landscape. Integrity of the landscape has a direct relationship to the manner in which a property is best interpreted to the public. Selecting the most suitable interpretive tools and devices can succeed in engaging the public with a place, and enriching their experience by providing a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural landscape.

Note

1 The project is a collaboration of LANDSCAPES Landscape Architecture, Planning, Historic Preservation, Graham Landscape Architecture and American History Workshop. Working with Historic St. Mary's City, an approach to these fascinating archeological resources has been developed over the past year.

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also the town planning assumptions that turned old village centers into sacred spaces. Statues in public parks commemorate local and national heroes, or ethnically-significant figures like Columbus or Kosciusko.

That's all very well for noting the major events of community founding, of wars and revolutions? What of the patterns of ordinary life in the past—how can they be recognized and interpreted amid the contemporary landscape?

The "ordinary" landscape offers many opportunities for rich interpretive interventions. In downtown Holyoke, MA, a water fountain richly ornamented with healthful messages communicates the ideological battle of the Women's Christian Temperance Union against Demon Rum in the early years of the 20th century. On the same model, street furniture can be splendid containers for contextualizing messages. Manhold covers "model" the transformation of a city's infrastructure, a park bench "carries" the history of children's play, steps in the pavement "register" the weekly rhythms of 19th-century market-days or the jammed downtowns of Saturday nights in American towns of the pre-television years. A bronze beaver on Portland's Morrison Street reminds Oregonians of an early export commodity, just as the Niketown store celebrates the newest variety.

Adroit pieces of public art like these reinsert historical and cultural complexity into places that are otherwise always tending toward the bland uniformity of American commercial environments. A community's history is its unique claim and most precious source of identity. By preserving or providing anew evidences of a place's superseded forms of everyday life, we legitimate the many contributors to its history.

In many of our outdoor interpretation projects, we create suggestive fragments of the past world. Visitors stepping onto the frame of a 1920s trolley car are much more likely to understand the way people traveled to work than by reading a plaque with hard-to-decipher maps. A pile of bricks, a trowel, and a mortar pan immediately communicate the hand labor of building. An artist's easel and palette, with a stool stationed in just the right position, draws visitors into looking at the landscape with the eyes of a painter. In such projects, we are inspired by the poet Mark Strand's lines, "In a field / I am the absence / of field. / This is / always the case. / Wherever I am / I am what is missing."

Conversely, what we sometimes wish to restore to a site is the scale of the human figure. The sculptural figures of artists like Seward Johnson or George Segal often powerfully communicate human presence in haunting ways, and tell good historical stories. Lloyd Lillie's twin statues of James Michael Curley in a Boston vest-pocket park frame the legendary mayor in two guises, as an orator and as a pal with whom you can share a park bench. All that's missing is a voting-box under the bench, with the famous doggerel legend, "Vote often and early / For James Michael Curley." Of course, by now it's started to rain in Skye. As I scamper to shelter in the mist, inspired by these interpretive dreams, I can look down into the peat and see the archeological remains of eons of plant and animal life. Tales of the faeries spring to mind. I can hear the bagpipes sending off the brave lads to the slaughters at Ypres and the Somme in 1916. Carts of kelp are being loaded onto vessels during the Napoleonic Wars. A radical leader of the local crofters is denouncing absentee landlords on the church steps in the 1880s.

I am a part of each of these moments and their steward.

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